

My Body, My Enemy

My thirteen year battle with anorexia
nervosa



Claire Beeken, With
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Claire Beeken

**MY BODY, MY ENEMY: My 13
year battle with anorexia nervosa**

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Beeken C.

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This ebook edition of a classic, bestselling autobiography completes Claire Beeken's powerful story, taking the reader on an inspirational journey to the present day. Claire Beeken first went to hospital with an eating disorder aged 10. For over a decade she locked herself into a vicious cycle of starvation, laxative abuse, binge-eating and vomiting, attempted suicide and periods in a psychiatric hospital. This graphically honest, deeply-affecting, and darkly funny account of Claire's illness tells the story of an ordinary girl from Luton living life with rare intensity. Since publication of the previous issue, Claire Beeken's groundbreaking techniques and work with sufferers of eating disorders has come to be internationally recognised. Claire's charity Caraline is now internationally acclaimed and the help-line that began life in her parents' front-room has become an established, and enormously successful, care and counselling centre. The updated material tells Claire's personal story – her feelings and her achievements since the early days of Caraline and also includes further inspirational 'case histories' of girls who have recovered from bulimia and anorexia with counselling.

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Note

To protect the innocent – as well as the guilty – I have changed and omitted some names. While I am pleased to be able to tell the story of my life, I am only sorry that I am still having to protect others.

Claire Beeken

This book is dedicated to my dear friend Caraline.
Caraline, I told you that while I was alive people would speak your name. I have kept my promise.

Claire Beeken

Chapter one

The man who ruined my life was dressed as Father Christmas. We were sitting in the front room – Grandma, Mum, Dad, my big brother Michael, my new baby sister Lisa and I – when he walked in with his white beard, red suit and jolly ‘Ho-Ho-Ho!’. I didn’t realize who he was then, when I was three; and it’s funny because now – when I watch the cine-film of Christmas 1973 – I still don’t recognize him as my grandfather.

Granddad and Grandma were Dad’s parents. They lived in the same street as us in Luton and we were a close family. Every Sunday they’d come to our house for dinner or we’d go to theirs. Michael and I totally adored them – there was no reason not to. Grandma was plump and always on a diet, but she loved her food too much. She had dark-grey hair and smoked in those days. Granddad smoked too. He liked Clan tobacco and walked round with his pipe in his mouth even when it wasn’t lit. He had a hooked nose and, under the trilby he always wore, his pure-white hair was thinning. You could tell from his freckly skin that he’d once had bright-ginger hair. Michael and I favoured Granddad because he gave us sweets. So did our dog, Sabre, who was always sniffing his pockets. Granddad would fumble in his pocket, fish out his white handkerchief and the mints he always carried, dig a bit deeper and produce a Mars Bar for us each.

Mum and Dad were poor and really struggled when we were young. Dad worked across the road for a factory manufacturing ball-bearings. As soon as he came in at night, Mum would go out to her cleaning job at the same factory. Dad worked weekends as well, and on Sundays Mum would sit down with us kids to watch the afternoon movie on TV. I liked the old Elvis films and Mum loved anything starring Mario Lanza. Sometimes Mum would point out of the window and say, ‘Look, there’s Daddy.’ We’d look up from the TV screen and there he’d be, waving from the roof of the factory wearing a big black coat with the name of the factory written on the back.

By the time my sister was three months old, money was the least of my parents’ worries. Lisa developed serious breathing problems and at first it was thought she had cystic fibrosis. She was eventually diagnosed as a brittle asthmatic, and the doctors told my parents that she was unlikely to make it to her 18th birthday. Poor Mum and Dad were constantly in and out of hospital with Lisa, and my brother and I increasingly found ourselves at Grandma’s for tea.

Grandma was a great cook – she made homemade doughnuts and did lovely roast potatoes. She used a lot of fat in her cooking and you’d be hit by the smell as you walked through the door. It was a typical old people’s house: the carpet in the hall was an orange and brown pattern and in the front room stood Grandma’s organ and a record-player in a long, old-fashioned cabinet. The records were Granddad’s: he liked popular songs like ‘Downtown’ by Petula Clark and ‘Stupid Cupid’ by Connie Francis. The fireplace was almost completely obscured by a battery of family photographs, and on the wall opposite hung a rug with deer on it – I loved that rug. The stairs twisted up to the first bedroom which was Granddad’s. It was a plain room with a wardrobe and two single beds. There were no books by his bed – he didn’t read. Next door was the toilet with its creaky door and cold lino floor. It smelt of hospitals in there and sometimes, instead of toilet paper, there would be newspaper. In the bathroom there was a white enamel bath with lime-scale round the taps – but the house wasn’t dirty, just old. My grandparents had separate rooms, and in Grandma’s there was a double bed, a dressing table and a clock with a loud tick. By the bed there were always hardback books from the library by Catherine Cookson or Jean Plaidy, a pair of reading glasses with thick, milk-bottle lenses, and religious things like rosary beads and Mass cards. Lastly, there was a tiny boxroom which housed Grandma’s big brown sewing machine with its fascinating pedals that I loved to press.

Grandma and Granddad’s back garden was a sun-trap. You opened the kitchen door and stepped down two steps to the coal bunker, which we kids were just desperate to jump off. ‘Get down!’ the adults would yell. But we knew that if we were good Granddad would sit us up there. We weren’t

allowed to move a muscle until he lifted us back down, in case we hurt ourselves. A thin concrete path ran the length of the garden, and an apple tree grew on either side. Behind the trees stood the shed where Granddad did his carpentry. He used to work as a chippy and he made amazing pieces of furniture. He retired when I was seven and I remember his retirement 'do'. Dad has a picture of me at the party – I'm wearing a blue dotted dress and have two pink ribbons in my hair.

I am nine when he begins touching me. My parents have just started trusting me to make a pot of tea and I am keen to demonstrate my new skill to him. Grandma is out and I feel very grown-up as I stand in his kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil, carefully heaping the right amount of tea leaves into the cracked white pot and setting out mismatched cups and saucers. I am surprised when Granddad comes up behind me and clasps me to him. Even more so when he turns me around, bends down and kisses me hard on the lips. His close tobacco breath makes me gasp. 'I love you, I really love you,' he whispers as his freckly old hands work their way over my body like a pair of poisonous spiders. Trapped in the sun-bright kitchen, a swell of unease washes over me, and my innocence begins to dissolve.

It next happens when Grandma is away. I go round one afternoon to find Granddad watching a film. He loves old films and likes a bet, and you can guarantee he'll either be watching the horses or a black-and-white movie. I make the tea and sit next to him. 'I'd really like to take you to my boudoir,' he says softly. Boudoir? I don't know what a boudoir is. I am sitting there, turning the word over in my mind, when he says 'Kiss me.' I peck him on the cheek, as a little girl does. 'No, on the lips. Properly,' he insists, grabbing my face and forcing my lips to his. When he releases me I pipe up, 'What's a boudoir, Granddad?' 'I'll show you,' he says; and he does.

Chapter two

I think I might have dreamed what Granddad did, but the pain between my legs tells me it's real. He said he did it because he loves me, and I believe him. Granddad makes me feel special and, with all the attention on my sick little sister, I need to feel special. I know that Mum and Dad love me, but I am jealous of Lisa and her illness which takes up so much of their time. Granddad is showing me all this love and at first I want to hold on to it. 'Don't you love me today, Granddad?' I say when he doesn't touch me.

What he does to me hurts, but I switch my mind to other things: meadows, flowers, whole episodes of *Coronation Street*. I lie there re-enacting the antics of Jack and Vera Duckworth and Hilda Ogden in my head, while the white-faced alarm clock by my grandfather's bed ticks away my childhood. Afterwards I feel like a zombie. I eat the Mars Bar he always gives me and walk home in a daze – alone if it is daylight, under grandfatherly escort if it is dark.

'Why are you always kissing Claire, Granddad?' asks my cousin. We are sitting watching television while the rest of the family are outside. Granddad keeps coming back indoors, leaning over the back of the settee and sticking soggy kisses on my forehead. Granddad doesn't answer the question, but looks down at me and winks. I feel awkward in the spotlight of my grandfather's attention, and wish I could fall between the settee cushions like a lost penny.

I love Granddad, but what he's doing doesn't feel right and I need to know if it is normal. 'What does your Granddad do with you?' I quiz a girl in my class at school. 'Oh, he takes me to the park and buys me ice cream and we have fun,' she breezes. 'Does he cuddle you?' I ask. 'Yes, he cuddles me,' says my classmate. 'What else does he do?' I probe. 'Nothing, why?' she says. 'No reason,' I reply, changing the subject quickly.

I start being frightened to go to my grandparents' house on my own. Grandma goes away a lot – to her sister's or her son's, and once to see her brother in Canada for a six-week holiday. 'Why don't you go down and see Granddad?' Mum would say. 'You know you're his favourite.' I'd feel the familiar scream rise up inside me: 'But I don't want to be Granddad's favourite. It doesn't make me feel good. I don't feel right being Granddad's favourite.' But my pain never slips out. Instead it moulders away in my head. I begin to develop searing migraines, and lie clutching my head while a rat seems to gnaw inside my skull. I cry a lot too, but never in front of anyone. I huddle up in my bed under the window, and through my tears I pray to God to take me away. I am always saying sorry to Him because I think I must be really bad. Why else does He let it keep happening to me? Why else am I being punished?

My 10th birthday is in April, and around this time my headaches become more frequent. I am also finding it difficult to eat – I can't shake the feeling that a bad thing will happen to me if I put something in my mouth. Mum and Dad don't notice at first, probably because I've been a difficult eater since the day I was born. During my first few months I had a bad chest and couldn't eat and breathe at the same time; I had to be fed like a little chick, every hour, 24 hours a day. The cine-film of my christening shows me looking like a war baby in a television news report.

I grow to be a faddy eater and particularly loathe school dinners, which annoys the dinner lady, Mrs Bacon. Her real name is Mrs something else but for some reason I've got it into my head that she's called Mrs 'Bacon'. One day, when I am six, she insists I stay behind to eat the dinner which, as usual, I have barely touched. The other children scatter to the playground, and I am left in the dining hall listening to their distant shouts. Mrs Bacon sits over me in her sickly-patterned overall and makes me eat. 'I'm going to be ill if you make me eat any more,' I say, staring into my bowl of

semolina. ‘You’ve got to eat it,’ she insists. I take another mouthful and my body gives a tremendous heave. Out fly the cabbage, the mash, the meat and the semolina with its little dollop of pink jam – all over the blue Formica tabletop and onto the floor. Mrs Bacon looks horrified, and shoos me off to the medical room as fast as she can. With a feeling of relief, I leave her to cover my dinner with the powdery disinfectant that always lies like a sand-dune after somebody has been sick.

As I get older, I refuse to eat anything resembling an animal or fish. I’ll happily tuck into sausages, beefburgers and fish-fingers but won’t touch sliced ham, roast beef or lamb. I eat chicken – but not the skin – and for some reason I never eat sandwiches unless they’ve been made by me or my mum.

Mum and Dad have always taken it for granted that I am a fussy, skinny kid, but when I get even fussier and skinnier during the autumn of 1980, they start to worry. After I’ve been off school for several days with a migraine and unable to manage any food at all, Mum takes me to the doctor. My plummeting weight and excruciating headaches point to meningitis, and I am whisked into the Children’s Annexe of Luton and Dunstable Hospital for tests.

At first they put me in a room on my own and I hate it: I pick at the awful food and am bored because I’m not allowed out of bed. Worst of all I am missing school. I hate school too, but I’ve been cast as the Virgin Mary in the school Christmas play. Grandma gave me a painted statue of the Virgin which I keep on the sill in my bedroom and carefully lift down onto my bed to dust. She is my pride and joy, and it has been my dream to play Mary since I was in the Infants. Rehearsals for the play have started, and I am worried that my understudy will get her hands on my part while I’m in hospital. Her name is Fleur: ‘It’s French for flower, you know,’ she says snottily.

After a couple of days, Dad brings in the small black-and-white TV we take on camping holidays. I am lying in bed watching the end of *Tiswas* when a nurse comes in. She sits down and says she’ll read me a story from *Black Beauty* – I love *Black Beauty*, and like to pretend that I am Jenny. I settle down to listen to the story, but the nurse says, ‘You’re going to have a lumbar puncture this afternoon.’ ‘Is it going to hurt?’ I ask. ‘A little bit,’ she says, looking away and launching into the story. I can tell by her face that she’s lying.

The painful room is through the double doors at the far end of the ward. Where blood tests are taken and injections given, it contains a bed and a screen and looks out over the hospital garden. A doctor and four nurses fill the room, and although I can’t see any needles, I can smell them. ‘Hop up on the bed, Claire, and turn over onto your front,’ the doctor says from behind his white mask. Rigid with fear I lie down on the bed. The nurses close ranks around me and arrange my body for the procedure. I am wearing a paper gown which ties up at the back, and no knickers, and my bottom lies cold and exposed. Wham! – in goes the injection. I shriek with shock and kick out at the nurses. They press down on my back and hold my legs and arms. ‘If you let us do it, it will be over very quickly,’ says one of the nurses. After an interval I hear him instruct the nurse ‘And again!’ Bam! – in goes another injection. I thrash like a harpooned seal, and scream and scream until the sedative takes effect and there’s no scream left. Then they turn me onto my side and insert the biggest needle of all into my spine to extract fluid from around my brain, and I don’t feel a thing.

Later, bent with pain from the lumbar puncture and still getting headaches, I am dosed with painkillers and can’t face the hospital food. Over the next few days the nurses keep pestering me to eat, which I find irritating. ‘What’s the big deal?’ I say. ‘I’m not hungry.’ Then the threats start. ‘If you don’t start to eat, Claire, we’re going to have to feed you through a drip.’ They transfer me to the General Ward where, too weak to walk from lack of food, I lie watching the girl in the bed opposite. She has lots of aunts and is surrounded by boxes and boxes of chocolates they’ve brought

in for her. I love sweets, and envy her as she absent-mindedly pops them into her mouth. She catches me staring and asks if I'd like a chocolate. 'No, thank you,' I say, rather surprised at the feeling of superiority it gives me.

I haven't eaten for three or four days when the big bossy matron settles herself on my bed with a bowl of Weetabix. She's smothered the cereal with sugar and poured on loads of milk – I loathe milk. 'The doctor says you have to eat this, Claire,' she says, thrusting the bowl under my nose. 'I don't want it,' I protest. 'I'm not hungry.' 'You've got to eat it, Claire,' she repeats. 'No, no, no,' I insist. 'I can't!' With that she holds my nose, my mouth springs open and in goes the spoon: it rattles against my teeth as matron tips the soggy mess down my throat. She repeats the process a couple of times and then lets me up for air. 'If you don't want me to do it, you've got to feed yourself,' she says. Burning with humiliation, I eat the rest unaided.

I am scared of meal-times after that. Each morning I dread the rumble of the steel trolley bearing down on me with its unwanted load of Weetabix, cornflakes, puffed wheat and piles of white bread and butter. I hear the metal jugs of milk rattle and catch the nauseating smell of Ready Brek as it wafts across the ward. I'm not going to risk another force-feeding so I ask for Weetabix, and fling most of it into the cupboard by my bed.

Matron gets wise to my trick and makes me sit at the table in the centre of the ward with the other patients. 'I've got to go to the toilet,' I say to the chocolate girl one dinner-time and leg it down the ward to the toilets next to the painful room. I bolt the cubicle door and pray: 'Dear Lord Jesus Christ, please don't let them know I'm in here. Please don't let them look for me. I can't eat. Don't let them find me. I promise I'll eat tomorrow.' There is an almighty bang on the door. Matron! 'Claire, open this door. If you don't, we'll come in and get you!' Sheepishly, I unlock the door and come out. Matron propels me to the table, but I howl and scream and will not eat.

'I'm going to pull the wool over your eyes,' I think to myself when the consultant is on his rounds next day. 'Hello, Claire. How are you this morning?' he asks. 'Fine, really well,' I say brightly. 'I'm ready to go home.' 'You're not eating much, Claire,' he says, casting his eye over the chart at the bottom of my bed. 'It's the food in here,' I say, with all the conviction I can muster. 'Mum cooks lovely food; I'll eat loads when I get home.' 'Okay,' says the doctor. 'You can go home.' I can't believe it. 'Yes!' I think. 'I'm going to be Mary!'

Mum and Dad come to collect me the following morning. They've brought my brown polo-neck jumper and matching checked skirt for me to wear and, as Mum zips up the skirt, it spins round like a hoop on a stick. I can see by Mum's face that she isn't happy. Poor Mum and Dad; I've been in hospital for three weeks and meningitis has been ruled out; but I'm still having headaches and not eating properly. Worry puckers their faces as they exchange glances and go to speak to Matron, and I am convinced they aren't going to take me home. 'That's it, I'm off!' I think, starting for the exit, but I am so weak and full of painkillers that I collapse and throw up.

The consultant is called and I barely notice him slip the intravenous drip into the vein in the back of my hand. But half an hour afterwards I begin to feel much, much better. I spend a week rigged up to the drip and Granddad continues to visit me most afternoons. He sits on the bed, asks how I am and gives me a Mars Bar. 'Thank you,' I say politely, laying it to one side, safe in the knowledge that he won't touch me because there are other people around.

One afternoon I actually feel like eating something, but I don't want his Mars Bar. 'I'm hungry,' I say to Granddad. Looking pleased, he rushes off to tell a nurse. She comes over with the tea trolley. 'I want that,' I say, pointing to a little iced chocolate cake with a diamond jelly in the centre. As I bite into it the nurse says, 'You know, if you eat we'll take this drip down and you'll be able to go home.' 'And then I can be Mary,' I think to myself. So I eat, and 48 hours later I am home.

The whole family turns out to see me in the Christmas play. ‘Your daughter has the voice of an angel,’ says somebody else’s mother to my parents. Mum tells me afterwards that Granddad cried.

Chapter three

‘If someone hits you, you hit them back,’ Dad says when I come home from school in tears. I am the loner whom everybody picks on. A girl in my class keeps threatening to beat me up and, after Mum buys me a new coat, the bully dumps it in the bin. Other kids say I am ugly and that I smell, and because I’m so skinny they call me ‘Skeletal’, ‘Stick Insect’ and ‘Xylophone’.

I still feel funny about food and am not eating normally. I never eat breakfast. If I go home from school for dinner Mum gives me soup or a sandwich which I sometimes eat, sometimes not. When I take in a packed lunch, I throw the sandwiches away and stuff myself with sweets instead. Mum would have killed me if she’d known, but because I usually manage my tea she doesn’t realize I’m not eating properly.

After a while I stop telling Mum and Dad that I’m being picked on – they’ve enough to worry about with Lisa, and what is happening to me at school isn’t half as bad as what happens to me at Granddad’s.

At the age of 11, I start at Lealands High. Mum says, ‘Sit with people you don’t know, so you make more friends.’ But I don’t. I sit next to Yvonne whom I know from junior school. Yvonne is bullied too because she has no hair. She is having chemotherapy for leukaemia and has to wear a scarf, and people pull it off to make her cry.

‘When you are older and you’ve got a job, you’ll wish you were back at school,’ Dad says. ‘Bet you a million pounds I won’t,’ I reply. I hate everything about school with two exceptions – dance and music. Our dance and music teacher is a blonde lady called Mrs Patterson. She’s rather plump but she can dance, and is a real tra-la-laaaa singer. She knows how to put a show together and always gives me lead parts. ‘I’m the gypsy – the acid queen,’ I mime along to Tina Turner’s soundtrack. We are doing *Orpheus and the Underworld* using the music from the films *Tommy* and *Grease*. With my face painted silver, a glitter disco dress and my head swathed in snakes, I am the Acid Queen and Ian Carrington is the Devil. Mrs Patterson always pairs me off with Ian who is the best boy dancer. I do a back-flip over him and then we launch into ‘You’re The One That I Want’.

When I am singing and dancing I feel different – I let go of my problems and am light and free. I look forward to Tuesdays and Thursdays when we have dance and music, and always sneak off games and go to the dance room instead. ‘Patterson-lover’ the other kids call me, but I don’t care. I only once refuse Mrs Patterson. She wants me to play a bellydancer in a pair of see-through net trousers over red knickers and a little bra-top. It is like being in your underwear and there is no way I’m doing it because it shows my body, and I know Granddad will be coming to watch.

‘Mum, you know Granddad?’ I say one day when I am 12 and desperately wanting to tell. ‘Yes?’ she replies. But the words wedge in my throat – what if she doesn’t believe me, what if I split up the family? I change the subject and swallow my terrible secret. As it festers inside, my behaviour worsens. I am either extremely high or extremely low. When I come home from school I often go upstairs to my bedroom and shut the door. I lie there for a good hour listening to my stereo before I can bring myself to speak to anyone. I love my family, but one of them is hurting me.

I have to share my bedroom with Lisa. We have Holly Hobbie wallpaper and matching duvets – Lisa is allergic to sheets and blankets. There are two white fitted cupboards along one wall with a dressing table in the middle. On it I keep my jewellery box which plays *Swan Lake* when you open it, and a bottle of ‘Rose’ perfume that I bought from the Avon lady. Lisa is hard to share a room with because when she isn’t having an asthma attack she is being neurotic. Before she can go to sleep she

has to touch the light switch over and over again, and say 'Goodnight, God bless, sweet dreams' to me 50 times. But I pay her back with my own catalogue of nocturnal twitches.

Sometimes, when I'm asleep, my eyes open. I go to bed early one night and Lisa comes in, thinks I am awake and starts talking to me. My subconscious may be keeping watch for the enemy, but I am fast asleep. Poor Lisa runs screaming down the stairs to Mum, thinking I am dead.

My sleep-walking frightens the hell out of Lisa too. She wakes to find me shouting, pulling the curtains and trying to climb out of the window. Another night she has one of her nosebleeds and, thinking I am awake, asks me to get her some loo paper. I go downstairs to the bathroom and come back with a hairbrush. 'What good's that going to do?' she says, packing me off downstairs again. Apparently, I wrench the toilet-roll off its holder, go into Mum and Dad's bedroom, turn on the light, lob the loo roll at Dad's head and go back to bed. I am asleep the entire time.

'Play with me, Claire,' Lisa is always moaning. I don't want to, but sometimes Mum makes me. We play *The Wizard of Oz*, but I always make sure that I am Dorothy, and Lisa is the Witch. As we grow older we have more in common, and when I am 13 and she is 9 we are both *Fame* mad – I have a *Fame* T-shirt and a *Fame* dance outfit – and love Thursday nights because *Fame* is on TV. I am finding it harder and harder to stomach my evening meal and, to Mum and Dad's annoyance, pick at my food and push it round the plate; but on Thursdays I eat everything. I am always extra-hungry because I've had dance at school and then done my paper-round which means a lot of uphill walking. Mum cooks burgers and ravioli or a curry – I love her curries – and then she goes late-night shopping, leaving Lisa and me scoffing toffees in front of *Fame*.

'Karen Carpenter has died from the effects of anorexia,' it says on the News on 4 February 1983. They show a video clip of her singing 'Mr Postman' while she flies around on the elephants at Disneyland. 'What was the matter with her, Dad?' I ask. I like The Carpenters: when I was little I used to stand on Dad's toes and we'd dance around to their music. 'She bleedin' starved herself to death, didn't she! Silly girl, throwing all that away,' he says. I don't understand it. I've never heard of anorexia, and my poor father never dreams that it is a word that will become all too familiar.

Everybody calls me 'Stick Insect' and takes the pee out of me, but I don't think I am as thin as a girl in my class called Kate; now, she is disgustingly thin! 'You're very thin, Kate,' I say. 'You're a lot skinnier than me,' she protests. 'I'm not,' I say, getting annoyed. We end up in some almighty rows. When we are in a childcare lesson, we get out the scales to settle it once and for all. I am gutted, absolutely gutted – she weighs 7 stone, I weigh 6½. I really thought I was bigger than her. It makes me so angry to be constantly teased about my weight, but it never crosses my mind that if I eat more I'll get bigger.

I might be skinny but inside I boil with an aggression that puts the fear of God into my fellow cadets in the Air Training Corps. My brother Michael is in the ATC first and I keep badgering his squadron leader to let me join. 'Girls put up wallpaper and paint pretty patterns. They can't be in the ATC,' scoff Michael and his friend Glyn, who are both in Icknield Squadron. But I want to do athletics and shoot with guns and go on weekend camps like the boys. When I am 14 the squadron leader relents and lets me enrol; and the boys in the squadron hate it.

'Get over here!' the squadron leader yells, and I love it. I try really hard not to be girly; I practise shooting with a 303 rifle until my shoulder is purple with bruises, and scrap with the best of them.

I adore my airforce blue uniform – the thick serge trousers, the big jumper with patches, the beret with its badge and, best of all, the huge pair of Doc Marten boots with steel toe-caps.

We are on night exercise near Aylesbury and have been split into two teams. My team has to find the bomb the enemy has planted and bring it back to camp. The squadron leader blindfolds us and drives us round and round in a van until we don't have a clue where we are. Then he unties our blindfolds and dumps us in a field. It's pitch-black and we have a great time diving on haystacks thinking they are the enemy. And then I spot a boy we call 'Mong' who is on the other team. Leaving my team behind I charge through the bushes, grab his legs, and throw him to the ground. Before he can scramble up, I sit on him. 'Where's the bomb? Where's the bomb?' I shout, laying into the enemy with my fists. 'Please don't hurt me, please don't hurt me!' the poor bloke begs. I am the lightest in the squadron, but I am on a mission and 'Mong' doesn't stand a chance. After that, all the boys want me in their team, otherwise I end up half-killing them!

When I'm not exorcising my anger in the ATC, or pushing myself through punishing dance routines to ease my pain, I spend hours and hours playing with my pets. I prefer them to people – animals don't hurt you.

Our house is a regular zoo. After Sabre dies, we get another Alsatian called Drummer, and have three fish – Freddie, Goldie and Rainbow, so-called because she has red lips, and four rabbits which I name Bramble, Holly, Smoky and Thumper. We start off with Bramble and Holly, and we kids buy Smoky for Mum and then Thumper for Dad one Father's Day. With each new addition our long-suffering father extends the existing hutch upwards.

Out shopping one Saturday I fall in love with a guinea-pig in the pet shop. I know Dad won't be pleased when I come home with yet another pet, but I want this guinea-pig badly. He looks just like a ginger scrubbing brush and I call him Fibre. I pay £3 for him, and carry him home in a cardboard box. Well, Dad goes spare! There is no room to add another floor to the high-rise hutch and he says I have to take Fibre back to the shop. But good old Granddad saves the day. He offers to make Fibre a hutch but says I have to help him. Grandma says if I go down one night after school she'll do me tea. I know what I'm letting myself in for, but I want to keep my guinea-pig so much that I agree.

It's hot, and I'm wearing a white, short-sleeved shirt tucked into my school skirt. It is a long pencil skirt, and I look like a pencil – I really do. I'm in a stinking mood all day, and can't concentrate in lessons because my mind keeps turning to what's going to happen later. I walk out of the school gates towards Grandma and Granddad's feeling sick, but the thought of Fibre going back to the pet shop propels me along. 'Hello,' says Grandma when I walk into the kitchen. 'Granddad's in the shed.'

The shed is really a garage which Granddad has turned into a workshop. It is made of grey corrugated metal and has two big windows which face the house but are obscured by the apple trees. As I walk towards the shed, hard little windfalls slide under my shoes and make me lose my footing. The entrance is round the side, and as I walk through the open door, I am met by the smell of sawdust, oily rags and Granddad's pipe. I can see that the double garage doors at the back of the building are blocked by shelves laden with tools and rusty tins oozing sticky stuff. Years later, when I see the film *Nightmare on Elm Street*, Freddy Kreuger's den reminds me of that shed. 'Hello, darlin',' grins Granddad, looking up from the most beautiful hutch I've ever seen. He's left a few nails for me to knock in, and I dutifully go over and hammer them in. Then, without a word, he shoots the bolt on the shed door – and what I dread most happens.

Afterwards, when I go back into the house, I can't manage the egg and chips that Grandma has cooked for me. I demolish the Mars Bar which Granddad gives me though. I always eat his Mars Bars in a particular way. I unwrap the top half and press my thumb down on the chocolate coating until

it cracks and the soft centre starts to ooze out. I like to see the chocolate mash between my fingers. Then I start to pull bits off it and stuff them into my mouth as fast as I can. As I force each piece down my gullet, my hand is poised at my lips with the next bit. Sometimes I eat so quickly that I swallow pieces of wrapper. I don't enjoy the chocolate, I don't taste it; I just eat until it is gone, and so fast that I often feel sick. It is a ritual – when the Mars is finished, the bad thing is over.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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